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STRENGTHENING PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS: ADDRESSING GAPS IN RESPONSES TO CLIMATE-RELATED HEALTH IMPACTS ON VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Yoonje (Philip) Song

Research Scholars Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

Climate change is an ongoing crisis with increasingly severe consequences, posing significant threats to public health systems. Its impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including low-income communities, older adults, children, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions. Manifestations of climate change, such as extreme heat, rising sea levels, and natural disasters, exacerbate these challenges and strain public health infrastructure. This paper examines existing gaps within health systems that limit their ability to address climate-related health risks, particularly for vulnerable groups. It also identifies key challenges and explores potential strategies to strengthen public health responses. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the development of climate-resilient public health infrastructure and the implementation of policies aimed at mitigating climate-related health impacts.

KEYWORDS: Climate Change, Public Health Systems, Vulnerable Populations, Climate Resilience, Health Policy

INTRODUCTION

For years, the frequency and severity of climate-related events have been increasing, posing significant challenges to public health systems globally. Extreme weather events, wildfires, and floods, as highlighted by Pavola (2017), disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including low-income communities, children, the elderly, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions. These disasters have far-reaching impacts, both physical—such as the spread of infectious diseases and heat-related illnesses—and mental, contributing to conditions like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite efforts by public health systems to mitigate these effects, substantial gaps persist in addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups.

Traditionally, public health responses have focused on immediate, short-term care, such as emergency medical assistance and the provision of basic necessities. While critical in the moment, these interventions often fail to account for the long-term health repercussions for affected individuals. Vulnerable populations are further hindered by systemic barriers, including socioeconomic inequality, insufficient infrastructure, and inadequate access to healthcare services.

Although there is growing recognition of the relationship between climate change and adverse health outcomes, current research remains limited—particularly regarding the impacts on vulnerable populations. Regional variability and methodological differences exacerbate these gaps, underscoring the urgent need for targeted, multidisciplinary research and collaborative efforts to inform effective and equitable public health responses.

This paper examines the existing public health framework for managing the health consequences of climate-related events, identifies key shortcomings in current responses, and proposes strategies for improvement. By focusing on ways to enhance public health systems to better support vulnerable populations, this research aims to contribute to the development of a more equitable and resilient public health infrastructure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An increasing body of research indicates that climate-related events significantly exacerbate health disparities, particularly among vulnerable populations in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Bush et al., 2009). Paradoxically, countries with lower contributions to environmental degradation often face disproportionate health challenges due to climate change, such as increased heat stress, air pollution, and vector-borne diseases (Bush et al., 2009). These findings underscore the importance of addressing region-specific health risks and enhancing monitoring systems to mitigate climate-related impacts effectively.

Extreme weather conditions caused by climate change pose direct threats to human health, particularly in densely populated urban areas. For example, findings from the 2008 Indo-U.S. Workshop on Climate Change and Health identified heat stress and air pollution as primary health concerns in India. The absence of robust environmental monitoring systems in LMICs further limits their ability to respond to these threats adequately (Bush et al., 2009).

Moreover, climate-induced ecosystem disruptions have indirect health consequences, including food insecurity, waterborne diseases, and mental health challenges, which disproportionately affect urban populations (Jurgilevich et al., 2023). Despite the growing recognition of these issues, public health systems often overlook indirect and cumulative health impacts, which represent the long-term consequences of climate change.

Research highlights the critical need for a socio-ecological systems approach that integrates urban planning and public health strategies to address these challenges.

The literature also emphasizes the delayed consequences of climate change, such as slow-onset mental health effects caused by displacement or prolonged exposure to deteriorating living conditions. Addressing these impacts requires anticipatory planning and long-term adaptation strategies, particularly for urban populations in resource-constrained settings (Jurgilevich et al., 2023).

Both studies underscore the necessity of further research into indirect and deferred health impacts to prevent fragmented adaptation efforts. Integrating insights from public health, environmental science, and urban planning is essential to developing comprehensive solutions that effectively safeguard vulnerable populations against the multifaceted health challenges posed by climate change.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a secondary qualitative methodology to explore the gaps in public health systems addressing climate-related health impacts on vulnerable populations. The research draws upon peer-reviewed articles, governmental reports, and case studies from credible organizations like the Public Health Agency of Canada and Environmental Health Perspectives. This approach provides a broad and in-depth understanding of the systemic challenges, regional disparities, and intervention strategies critical to public health resilience against climate change.

The qualitative aspect allows for the examination of nuanced socio-ecological dynamics and diverse stakeholder perspectives, including multidisciplinary collaboration and community-specific interventions. However, the study's reliance on secondary data limits the ability to provide real-time insights and may introduce biases from source material. Additionally, variability in regional data availability and methodologies across studies poses challenges to generalization. Despite these limitations, this method effectively highlights actionable insights and lays a foundation for future empirical research on the subject.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The findings underscore critical gaps in public health systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where inadequate environmental monitoring and data collection hinder effective responses to climate-related health risks. This perpetuates a harmful cycle where vulnerable populations remain underserved, exacerbating health disparities.

Public health measures often adopt a "one size fits all" approach, disregarding regional socio-ecological diversity. For instance, in India, unique climatic and demographic factors influencing health outcomes are insufficiently addressed (Bush et al., 2009). Addressing such gaps requires tailored interventions that consider localized contexts.

Growing recognition of these gaps has led to innovative recommendations. A report by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2023) highlights the need for a holistic approach that respects diverse perspectives on climate change and public health. One expert articulated a vision of "sacred reciprocity with all life," emphasizing systemic transformation to support both human and ecological health. This perspective challenges traditional risk management frameworks, advocating for structural change to address underlying vulnerabilities. The report also stresses the importance of multidisciplinary approaches. While public health traditionally relies on quantitative data, experts call for incorporating insights from the social sciences, indigenous knowledge, and community expertise. A participant emphasized the value of engaging "historians, anthropologists, indigenous elders, and Black elders" in public health decision-making processes. This inclusive strategy fosters collaborative spaces for knowledge exchange, such as the concept of "Two-Eyed Seeing," which blends Indigenous and Western perspectives. By creating opportunities for mutual understanding, public health systems can develop community-led communication and partnerships.

Localized expertise is another crucial element for addressing climate-health impacts. Experts recommend adapting systems to reflect community-specific needs, such as tracking localized climate hazards and their effects on mental health and emergency care. For example, air quality monitoring during wildfires and addressing isolation-induced mental health issues are vital for tailoring interventions to diverse populations.

Accountability and consistent funding are essential for sustainable climate-health initiatives. Experts advocate for holding decision-makers responsible for inaction, emphasizing the need to consider health consequences in policy decisions. Programs like HealthADAPT exemplify the importance of stable funding to maintain climate resilience without interruptions due to resource scarcity.

By addressing these systemic challenges through multidisciplinary collaboration, localized solutions, and robust accountability, public health systems can become more resilient and equitable in responding to climate-related health impacts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although there has been increasing attention to the intersection between climate change and public health, significant gaps remain that need to be addressed. This study highlights key areas requiring urgent action to bridge these gaps, including the absence of a comprehensive system for monitoring and data collection, the lack of region-specific research focusing on risk factors and intervention effects, and the need for more attention to indirect and long-term health impacts.

Public health systems can enhance their ability to protect vulnerable populations from the effects of climate change by implementing various strategies, such as decolonizing public health practices, adopting multidisciplinary approaches, fostering collaborative knowledge exchange, and establishing

localized, community-specific monitoring frameworks. By addressing these critical areas, public health can not only mitigate current vulnerabilities but also pave the way toward fostering healthier, more resilient communities.

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